



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF LITERATURE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

M. CATHERINE MAHY, A.M.

Instructor and Supervisor of English in the Hope Street High School,
Providence, R. I.

An editor of one of our English school classics, in his chapter on "Aids and Suggestions to the Teacher," has made the, to me, surprising statement that no secondary teacher can hope for more from his pupils than an intellectual appreciation of the masterpieces of literature. Indeed, he went so far as to say that from college classes in the sophomore year, he had succeeded in securing nothing more. The aesthetic taste, he affirms, the fine feeling for the beautiful and imaginative, is a development of later growth. In other words, the boy who sits poring over King Arthur, Beowulf, Siegfried, Achilles, and Hector until his young imagination is all on fire with that fierce, life-giving heat which kindled the great hearts of primitive heroes to such mighty feats of "derring-do," cannot respond to the subtle imaginative element in literature as can the sophisticated youth, who has passed through a course of junior forensics, and has learned in his critical study of the early English and mediaeval periods that the Grendel story is a myth, which probably originated in the fact that a great bear had once invaded Heorot; that the men who went in search of the Holy Grail were grossly immoral; and that the fair ladies, whose "bright eyes rained influence" from the balcony of the tournament, were the very reverse of "spirituelle."

Before entering upon this discussion, it might be well to define the term, "aesthetic," as it will be employed in this paper. Professor Sherman, of the University of Nebraska, bases his method for the analytic study of English upon the theory, advanced by Emerson, that all the elements which go to make up a piece of literature may be classed under two heads, the true and the beautiful. The true is that which appeals to the intellect; the

beautiful is that which appeals to the senses, or imagination, in its lower flights. The highest imagination, which he terms "vision," I think he would consider the expression of the essence of truth, that truth which is one with beauty. Let us then take as a broad definition of aesthetic, that which appeals to the emotions and to the imagination, without trying to reduce this psychological problem to its physical and psychical terms.

According to this definition, if we accept the view of our editor, we must believe that the dominant note of Wordsworth's "Ode to Immortality" is a lie. Yet our own hearts and the memories of our own youth echo the lines:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
 The Soul that rises with us, our Life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy,
 Shades of the prison-house begin to close
 Upon the growing boy,
 But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
 He sees it in his joy;
 The Youth, who daily farther from the East
 Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
 And by the Vision splendid
 Is on his way attended:
 At length the Man perceives it die away,
 And fade into the light of common day.

Yet, though this passage supports my theory, I consider it but a half-truth. To find its complement and corrective, turn to Lowell's prelude to the *Vision of Sir Launfal*:

Not only around our infancy
 Doth heaven with all its splendors lie;
 Daily, with souls that cringe and plot,
 We Sinais climb, and know it not.

I quote these lines of the American poet that I may not be misunderstood, that I may not seem to go to the other extreme,

as Macaulay appears to do in his "Milton," when he argues that only in early childhood is the purest imagination possible. Of course, every thinking man or woman will say that only in manhood, when the crude pedantry of college days has become knowledge assimilated to life, when we have learned to see the truth of beauty and the beauty of truth, when the lines of the poet answer, throb for throb, to the beating of our own heart's joy or sorrow, can we truly climb the "Sinai's" of literature. But this is not the question. The point I am trying to make is that this fine appreciation is not a gourdlike growth, springing up with maturity, but the result of a development which begins with birth, and perhaps, as Wordsworth says, before it.

What is this fine, evanescent element, without which no piece of writing deserves the name of literature; this something before which the most up-to-date critic must pause and await further developments in psychology, but the product of that equally evanescent, equally wonderful, thing we call imagination? If, then, childhood and youth is, as we all admit, pre-eminently the time when the imaginative powers are most active, and if like responds to like, why is it that the author's imagination fails to strike fire from the child's? Why must we keep our girls and boys in the shadow of that dark roof of intellectual appreciation, which shuts off from them the spaceless vault above, through which,

Heaven's light forever shines.

In the nature of things, there seems to be no good answer to this question. And, yet, our editor must be speaking truth, when he tells us that he finds no vestige of the poet's "trailing clouds of glory" hovering over his classes, and can only hope they will rise on the horizon of matured manhood. Yes, he is speaking truth, as hundreds of his fellow-teachers in English will testify from their own experience. Now if this state of things exists, and if, as we have seen, there is no inherent reason why it should exist, wherein lies the difficulty? This question was answered in a very startling fashion by a girl in the third year of the high school, with whom I was conversing recently. I was telling her of the intense appreciation of *Evangeline* shown by a little

boy in one of my preparatory classes. "Oh," said this wordly wise young woman of sixteen, "they will soon knock that out of him." A pessimistic view, but I felt that my young friend had put her finger on the weak spot of our English work, and said, "Thou ailest there." If the high-school teacher finds that his class as a whole is insensible to the best part of literature, that he can feed them only the husks, he may rest assured that the fault lies either with himself or with the child's previous training in home and school.

If he finds that the fault lies with himself, how shall he remedy it? Perhaps there will be no remedy short of giving up the work, and turning his attention to some other branch to which he is better adapted. We all know that the ideal teacher of English, like the poet, "is born and not made." By this, we do not mean that training is not necessary; on the contrary, English-teachers need a great deal more training than the great majority of them have actually had, but this is irrelevant to the present discussion. The point I would emphasize is that in this case training *per se* will not avail. Yet, how slowly some of our educators are opening their eyes to this truth! Even in our best schools they will put the English class in the hands of men and women totally unfitted by nature for the work, hard-headed, soulless, loveless, lifeless, colorless individuals, who might much better be employed in teaching mathematics, or better still, outside of the schools altogether. A person of this type never wrote, in his youth, surreptitious little poems and stories, which he fondly dreamed would some day appear in a collection of his "earliest works." He never wandered off from his companions to some lonely place to lie under a tree, where he might listen to the myriad notes of woodland life, or let the "witchery of the soft blue sky," as it gleamed through the branches, "melt into his heart." He never arose at midnight to gaze with hushed, breathless awe at the silent, eternal mystery of the stars. He never saw all his world transformed and glorified by the glow of Aladdin's lamp, nor did he ever, like "Chad," in *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, joust with a ram for a charger, after reading *Ivanhoe*. Oh no, he, or more likely she, never did

any of these things. Perhaps he was always making toy boats or engines, and it may be that she, like the aunt of Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, had never once caught a glimpse of that magical realm of dreams and romance, to which children, and those fortunate men and women who have kept the hearts of children, love to flee when rasped by the commonplace. Yet there they are, seated behind a desk, authorized to train souls, emotions, sensibilities, to cultivate the beautiful side of character, to win appreciation for that mysterious something in literature, which the keenest critic cannot define. O, teachers, if you ever find a Rebecca or a Chad in your classes, will you win them to the ranks of English-teachers, and turn all other aspirants aside into the subjects where it doesn't matter so much?

In sketching this character of the ideal English-teacher, I have not mentioned that side of his nature, which is just as essential as the one I have emphasized, but does not pertain to the phase of the subject I am considering. I refer to the calm, strong, logical reason, which constantly holds the imagination in check—that fine sense of form, order, precision, without which his work will become desultory and superficial, appealing perhaps to a few romantic girls, but not to the strong-minded, rational boy.

But waiving this as apart from our topic, let me come to the second difficulty. Granting that the high-school teacher has all these qualifications, he may at the same time have difficulty in arousing in his class that "fine frenzy" of literary appreciation.

In that case, if it is possible for him to trace the history of his class from the homes, through the grades which it has passed, he will find the secret of the trouble. In the first place, he will find few, if any, books in the homes, but since we cannot control the homes, at least not directly, let us leave this consideration, and accompany him through the grades which have done so much to mold his pupils. Perhaps he will find in the lowest grade of the primary school a colorless sort of teacher, without energy or enthusiasm, one who does not know how to tell a story, much less to act one, who teaches the childish songs in a dull, lifeless voice that stresses all words alike, and is absolutely incapable of

expressing tone color. And perhaps, though we trust this state of things exists only hypothetically, he may trace his class through the upper primary and grammar grades, without finding a single teacher with a spark of the true Promethean fire, but many, alas! with the power to smother the sparks of that fire, which it was their duty and privilege to fan into an ardent flame.

Grade teachers, it lies largely with you to determine whether or not the high-school pupil shall be debarred from the choicest part of literature. Your work cannot be undone; whether good or bad, it must stand as the foundation stone. And this foundation must be laid in the reading-class. If I had my way, every teacher of reading or of secondary English should have a rigorous training in voice-culture and elocution. An English-teacher, who is a poor, unsympathetic, colorless reader, is an anomaly that has no right to exist. The harm he may do the cause of literature, and through that the character of our youth, is infinite in its possibilities.

We have traced a class of pupils through the hands of a succession of teachers unfitted for their calling. Now look on the other side of the picture. Enter a primary room, where a sweet-faced, enthusiastic teacher is telling, with vivacious tone and lively gesture, the story of "Little Red Riding Hood." See her improvise a hood for Annie out of a red table cloth, and a cap for Jimmie out of a piece of cheese cloth, reserved for a duster. Watch Little Red Riding Hood trace her way fearfully along the supposed woodland path, between two rows of chairs, with the basket on her arm that teacher's deft fingers have fashioned from an old newspaper. Note the surprise in the childish tones as she interrogates the supposed grandmother, and the fierce, answering growl, with which the wolf reveals his identity. Then turn to the room, and see the agony of attention, note the hushed expectancy that follows upon this dread climax, and tell me whether this is or is not literary appreciation. This teacher, at the very beginning of the child's English training, has shown him *the life that lies beneath the word*. Just suppose now—though this is a supposition that can never be realized outside of an educational utopia—suppose, I say, that all the succeeding

primary and grammar teachers will be of the same type, suppose they all will be bent on revealing the life beneath the word!

This brings me to the solution of our problem, if solution it has. Let the English-teacher teach the life that lies beneath the word, and there will be no more occasion to complain of a lack of aesthetic appreciation. How little stress has been laid upon this life is painfully evident from the reading of the pupils who come to us from the grammar schools. Their pronunciation and enunciation may be good, and they may pay due attention to punctuation marks, but it is clear that the average pupil does not feel the full force of the words he is reading. You know that the two questions uppermost in his mind are, How shall I pronounce this word? and Where is the next punctuation mark? Take, for example, those speeches of Shylock, with their suppressed hiss of hatred and revenge. I have had pupils who insisted on reading them in exactly the same tone as they did Portia's inspired plea for mercy, thinking in both cases that their duty was done, if they had pronounced the words correctly. I have had seniors, who summoned Mirth and hailed Melancholy, without the shadow of a change in voice or feature. To such pupils, literature is little more than a collection of words and punctuation marks, which, arranged in a certain order, tell a story.

Perhaps my thought will seem the impractical one of a visionary, but the question I would like to ask is this: Can we not improve the reading, and at the same time the appreciation, of our pupils by breaking through the crust of words and showing them the living idea? Our Teutonic ancestors delighted in stories of great treasure hidden beneath a rock, and guarded by a dragon. The idea with us is often like the hidden treasure, concealed by the word, guarded by the dragon custom. Let us be modern Beowulfs and, slaying the dragon, remove some of these rocks.

Beginning with a line from Tennyson's *Princess*, "I read a page that *rang* of tilt and tourney;" how shall we read that word "*rang*"? Just forget the word, and listen. What do you hear? The blare of the trumpets, the thunder of hoofs, the shock of the charge, the din of the spears as they strike the shields, the

clang of the battle-axe on the helmet. Now read the line for the boy, and as he repeats it after you, his imagination fired by that vision of a glorious past, note if there is not a ring in his voice and a flash in his eye. Next, take a word from Lowell's *Vision of Sir Launfal*:

The flush of life may well be seen
Thrilling back over hills and valleys.

What a mine of treasure is concealed beneath that word "thrilling"—the flowing of the sap, the struggle of the seed-leaves, the upward striving of the grasses, the bound of the brook as it leaps from its ice chain, the flutter in the breast of the bird as it pours forth its love-song. Make the child *feel* all this, then tell him to say "thrilling." We have many words in our language that, to the true thinker, are as rich in suggestion, and as fresh in feeling today as their roots were to the primeval man, who invented them by laying his ear close to Nature's heart, and translating its beats into human speech. For example, "murmur" is a sweet echo of the running brook, "rustle" is the sigh of the wind-swept leaves, "ripple" and "gurgle," the speech of the summer sea, "howl," "shriek," and "moan," the voice of the tempest. If we teach our pupils to read beneath the surface, I do not believe that they will say these words in the same tone as "and," "but," or "is."

Let us turn now from individual words to larger units of thought. When Hiawatha kills his first deer, it is easy, even for young children, to understand what that means to the Indian boy. Picture for them the youth hidden in the bushes, his arrow on the string, his bow distended, the palpitation of his heart as he takes aim, the moment of breathless uncertainty, the glad shout when the prey falls. Hiawatha is a boy no longer, but a hunter, a brave. Now read the lines,

Beat his timid heart no longer,
But the heart of Hiawatha
Throbbled and shouted and exulted.

Then turn to that passage describing the departure of Hiawatha from his people. What does it mean? The glory of a race is past. The white man's foot is on the neck of the proud brave.

The God of the black-robed chief sits in the place of Gitche Manito, the mighty. The blow of the axe drives away the spirits of the wood, and the great canoe with pinions casts its ominous shadow upon the big sea water. Let the little ones sound, as well as their young hearts are able, the depths of this great tragedy before they read,

And they said, "Farewell forever."
Said, "Farewell, O Hiawatha!"
And the forests, dark and lonely,
Moved through all their depths of darkness,
Sighed, "Farewell, O Hiawatha!"

I tried this experiment of reading beneath the surface with one of my classes last year. I was fortunate enough to have assigned to me one of the preparatory classes, corresponding to the eighth grade of the grammar school. Once a week, we had a lesson in *Evangeline*. I told my class that good reading was voice painting. I showed them how, with the voice, we could express, not only joy and sorrow, hatred and love, denunciation and pleading, but also light and shade, silence and tumult, rest and motion, height and depth, nearness and remoteness. Then we began. One little boy, with a big voice, impersonated excellently, "the deep-voiced, neighboring ocean." A little girl rendered the lines about "the murmuring pines and the hemlocks." And how delightful that word-painted poem was! The boys especially were keyed up to the height of appreciation, when we read,

Oft on sledges in winter, as swift as the swoop of the eagle,
Down the hillside bounding, they glided away o'er the meadow.

We pictured it all, the first smooth dash down the hill, the great jolt as the sled went over the "bumper," and then the long glide over the snowy level stretch at the foot of the slope. Every boy in that class was on a sled. On one occasion, after a pupil had read,

Faces, clumsily carved in oak, on the back of his arm-chair,
Laughed in the flickering light, and the pewter plates on the dresser
Caught and reflected the flame.

a girl raised her hand. "I do not like the way that was read,"

was her criticism. "The light flickered too slowly, and the pewter plates were dim."

This year's class, of the same grade, is ready to respond, with the same warm appreciation. A few weeks ago, we were reading the passage in *Evangeline* which describes the coming of evening and night, when the cows return from pasture, the horses come back, drawing the wains filled with the salt hay of the marshes, and the sheep straggle homeward, guarded by the dog. I held my book face toward my class and said, "Boys and girls, you don't care anything about those black marks on that page, do you? The pictures are not there. Where are they?"

Quick as a flash, someone answered, "In our heads."

"Yes," I said, "that is just where they are and what does the poet do?"

"Oh," spoke up one of my geniuses, "he just turns the crank."

"Yes," I replied, seizing upon the figure, "he just turns the crank. He is running the lantern, and the slides are in your heads."

It was inspiring to see how they caught at that idea, how eagerly they waited for the next slide to pass through their heads, and how ready they were to criticize, if some boy, in telling what was on his "canvas," left out a detail of the picture. My little genius became so excited that he could not keep his seat, but jumping up, exclaimed, with eyes flashing blue fire, "Oh, you can see it all! You can fairly smell that salt hay!" And at the close of the period, he lingered to tell me that the "English period flew."

My preparatory class of last year is now in the first year of the high-school course, and building upon the foundation already laid, I am giving them studies in the atmosphere of Irving's stories, as part of the work. The response is gratifying in the highest degree. They see so readily how the "fairy mountains," with their "magical," ever-changing hues, harmonize with the central theme of *Rip Van Winkle*, and going more into detail, they delight to show the adaptation of nature's mood to the human mood. They see at a glance why the Hudson should be so still, with one lagging bark on its glassy bosom, and why

there should be one lone crow, "winging its solitary flight" through the darkening glen, when Rip is going to sleep. Then, of course, they are ready for the contrast, when Rip awakes; now the dream is over, and with a start, we come back to reality, to the mountain stream, full of life and motion, to the eagle "breasting the pure mountain breeze," and to the whole flock of crows, sporting about a tree. Similarly, in the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, they enjoy finding the different elements which combine to produce the all-pervading feeling of drowsiness and ghostliness. After we had studied this piece, a little girl of twelve came to me one morning, with flushed cheeks and bright eyes. "Oh," she exclaimed triumphantly, "I've won them! I've won them!"

"What have you won?" I asked, smiling at her beautiful young enthusiasm.

"The souvenir postals of Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow," she responded, spreading four cards on my desk. "Just look at that one," she went on eagerly, indicating with her childish finger a card, representing the old mill at Sleepy Hollow. "Look at those weeping willows, and that quiet stream! Did you ever see such atmosphere?"

This aesthetic element enters into our themework as well. In fact, every principle acquired in the study of a piece of literature is immediately applied to the written work. The result has been that from these young pupils ranging from the ages of eleven to fifteen, I have received productions, which I, at least, consider literature. Let me quote a few examples, all from the work of this one class, though when I try to choose, it is difficult, as all the work is of such a high order.

Here is the last exercise handed in by the little twelve-year-old girl already alluded to:

A SUMMER EVENING

The rippling sea is softly singing a lullaby to the fish floating dreamily near its surface; the cool winds glide softly through the trees, making the leaves fan the downy birdlings sleeping comfortably in the oval nest; a drowsy, restful darkness is slowly covering the land; and all is still, with the exception of the distant hooting of the owl, or the repeated calling of the whip-poor-will, whose note pierces the dark silence.

The next is a quotation from a composition of a boy of the

same age, who came to me at the beginning of last year and asked me if I would please let him see some other pupil's composition, so that he might get an idea how to write one of his own. The paragraph is taken from a theme entitled, "A Walk by the Sea":

As I was half walking and half being blown along the rocky beach, I heard the invisible waves rise and go foaming and pounding down on the pebbles, which the undertow was drawing out, to send them back with that mighty and inconceivable force of the ocean. After walking along the beach a short distance I turned homeward where, while I was enjoying the fire on the hearth, I could hear above the howling of the wind the majestic roar of the ocean, which brought to my mind the wonderful powers of the Almighty God.

The following is from a recent composition by a boy of fifteen, who last year handed in a few crude little attempts in which I discovered a fine feeling for nature. On inquiry, I found that he spent most of his time in the woods. I immediately became interested, in spite of his atrocious spelling and sentence structure. What I am about to quote is from a copy which he revised himself, with but very little assistance from me in the matter of technique. The thought is all his own. The theme is entitled, "A Ride":

The locust was singing his song, and little Dame Song Sparrow flew on the old weather-beaten and broken-down fence, then after pruning her feathers, flew away into the bush. As I neared a clump of low bushes near the road, Mother Quail, with her half-grown flock of young, fled, with a whirl of wings, into the neighboring forest. I turned into a sandy road, which led to the woods, and then out into a little village. The horse was hot and sweaty, and my throat and lungs were parched for water. I stopped in the center of the forest. The air was scented by the pine cones, and gum and sap stood on the rough bark and knots, which looked as if the sun had scorched the life-blood out of them. Oh, how I longed for a drink of cool water, but no spring was to be seen. The poor foliage seemed to hold up its leaves toward the sky and beg for rain. In many places, were the wood-violets, withered and gone to seed, and a little Solomon's seal here and there, with the tips of its leaves all brown. Along the sides of the road, was the goldenrod, and a few leaves of the woodbine were turning red and yellow. The clover tops showed their brown heads in the meadow. Onward I went, nearly exhausted by the heat. I threw off my jacket. The dust rose up in clouds from under the horse's feet.

I will conclude these citations with part of a theme, entitled, "The Little Sea Gull," written by a girl of thirteen, when in the eighth grade, the girl who criticized the reading of the passage from *Evangeline*, about the flickering fire-light:

Far above the nest were hundreds of white gulls, screaming and screeching, as they floated on their broad, white wings, and looking with their fierce eyes, now at the meadow, now far off on the blue-gray sea, which swept in, in oily waves, and broke and retreated in long swashes from the stony shore. Ten miles to the north, lay the mainland, its hazy gray mountains rising like tidal waves against the sky, but the open sea stretched far to the south, east, and west in solemn, mighty silence. Wild and free, free and wild, was the ceaseless song of the gulls, and the ocean, joining in with its deeper, more powerful music, filled you with a longing for this wild life, a desire to be a part of it yourself and to feel its freedom. But the little brown gull knew nothing of this, and was wondering in a vague, sleepy way, why the great noise and screaming had stopped, not troubling, however, to open his eyes and see that the sun had set, and that in its place, was a great golden moon looking down on the quiet sea and scattering untold wealth over the waves. But he heard the gentle southwest wind, which had sprung up and was murmuring through the green firs not far away, sighing a soft lullaby. "Choo-oosh, choo-oosh," sobbed the sea; and the wind murmured "who-oo-oo-who-oo-oo, choo-oo-oo;" and the little gull put his head down and went to sleep. And the moon, looking down, nodded her head as she saw him, and said, "I know, I know. Some day he will be the leader, for he will be wise and strong." And the great hollow trunks of the dead trees, shining silver in the moonlight, echoed, "Yes, yes, he will be wise and strong. We know, we know."

And yet, in spite of all this, there are those who will say we must not look for aesthetic appreciation from the young, who will tell us that the one aim of the high-school instructor in English is to teach pupils how to make fine grammatical distinctions and to write a correct sentence, teachers who will groan over Irving's bad English instead of putting their pupils in touch with his warm, genial, sunny personality; teachers who will pounce upon the luckless individual who drops his voice at a comma, but will remain supremely indifferent while he reads,

And through the dark arch, a charger sprang,
in the spiritless tone that would describe the jaded motion of
a cart-horse.

English teachers, "Accuse not nature; she hath done her part; do thou but thine."